DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 204 451 UD 021 512

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TITLE Toward a Phenomenology of Dwelling and Building: Hassan Fathy's "Architecture for the Poor" as an Indication.
PUB DATE 20 Apr 81
NOTE 14p.: Paper prepared for the Annual Meetings of the Association of American Geographers (Los Angeles, CA, April 20, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Architectural Character: Book Reviews: *Building Design: *Cultural Influences: Foreign Countries: *Housing: *Social Influences
IDENTIFIERS Egypt: *Fathy (Hassan): *Heidegger (Martin)

ABSTRACT

The philosophy of Martin Heidegger has major bearing on work in humanistic geography and related environmental fields. Dwelling, according to Heidegger, is the process through which people make their place of existence a home. For all the seeming rightness of Heidegger's view, there is much about dwelling that confounds and alienates many present day social scientists. One work that helps to demonstrate the importance of the notion of dwelling is Hassan Fathy's "Architecture for the Poor" (1969), which portrays the context of dwelling for Egyptian peasants located in an Upper Nile village. According to Fathy, a building will be successful when it incorporates both structural and sociocultural/religious elements of people's lives. Besides encompassing time and environment, Fathy holds, building (as it arises from dwelling) reflects and sustains a people's society and the socioeconomic order that maintains their sense of group purpose and cohesiveness. This depiction seems far from our own world, yet we too strive to dwell and must ask how our world can be made better to foster dwelling and our need to dwell. It is precisely because we have reached such a tremendous level of technology and sophistication that the notion of dwelling becomes crucial. A phenomenological consideration of empirical accounts like Fathy's brings the notion of dwelling into a context which is less complex existentially than Heidegger's and closer to essential needs of environment and individual human beings. (Author/GC)

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by David Seamon

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TOWARD A PHENOMENOLOGY OF DWELLING AND BUILDING: HASSAN FATHY'S ARCHITECTURE FOR THE POOR AS AN INDICATION*

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The philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) has major bearing on work in humanistic geography and related environmental fields (Jager 1975, Buttimer 1976, Relph 1976, Grange 1977, Seamon 1979, 1981 a and b, Norberg-Schulz 1980). Whereas many approaches to social and behavioral science today advocate change through a direct manipulation of the material, socioeconomic world, Heidegger, recognizing humankind's fragility and participation in a universe of meaning which he calls Being, seeks to reduce people's anthropomorphism and to usher in a new world outlook founded in openness and care. The aim is a reintegration of earth, people and invigorated spirituality arising from the individual's reflexive awareness of his or her life and mortality. The crux of such a possibility is what Heidegger calls in his later work dwelling (1971).

Dwelling, according to Heidegger, is the process through which people make their place of existence a home. To dwell is "to be on the earth as a mortal," which in turn means "to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for" the place and community where one chooses to live (Hiedegger 1971, p. 147). The key to dwelling, Heidegger argues, is sparing and preserving -- the kindly concern for land, things, creatures and people as they are and as they can become. As human beings, we cannot fail to dwell, for dwelling, ultimately, is the essential existential core of human being-in-the-world from which there is no escape. The key question is how do we dwell in our own particular situations and how can we affect the quality of our dwelling for better or worse?

For all the seeming rightness of Heidegger's view, especially in today's times of homelessness and placelessness, there is much about dwelling that confounds, troubles, and alienates many present-day social scientists. First, there is a quality of etherealness and abstraction. For example, Heidegger argues that in concrete terms, dwelling is the gathering of what he calls the fourfold -- the coming together in place of earth, sky, people and a sense of spiritual reverence (or "the gods," as Heidegger symbolizes higher realities). Intuitively, this notion of a fourfold gathering seems right, but a conventionally trained social scientist may wonder what it means practically, especially in the secular, spatially and environmentally transcendent world of today. In this regard, the guide throughout Heidegger's discussion of dwelling is not the urbanized, spatially-transcendent lifestyle of modern Western society, but rather a tightly knit community of peasants, farmers and craftsmen having a sense of religious purpose to their lives. In short, Heidegger's picture of dwelling seems at first glance romantic and nostalgic. It suggests that many past historical situations fostered a richer, more authentic existence than present

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times. The emphasis is a self-sufficient, place-based mode of living in which people have intimate contact with an environment and community that they care for and cherish. They regularly give thanks for their place in a larger natural and spiritual world.

There are two ways to respond to Heidegger's picture of dwelling. Once can say the presentation is irrelevant to a technicalogical world that has largely overcome space, place and physical environment. On the other hand, one can see in Heidegger the harbinger of a new lifestyle. The modern world faces a predicament: at an aggregate level, problems of population, energy and ecology; at an individual level, problems of malaise, loneliness, and inequities. Heidegger argues that none of these problems can be solved unless we first bring attention to dwelling and how we dwell.

Because our capacity for dwelling is intimately linked to our places of dwelling, both architecturally and environmentally, it may be possible to demonstrate the importance of the notion of dwelling through a phenomenological interpretation of various empirical descriptions which portray in unselfconscious fashion Heidegger's sense of dwelling in relation to a particular time and place. One such work is the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy's Architecture for the Poor (1969), which portrays the context of dwelling for Egyptian peasants living in the Upper Nile village of Gourna. These peasants are tomb robbers, and immediately after World War II the Egyptian government decides they must be relocated. Fathy is assigned to carry out this relocation, and his book describes his efforts to construct from scratch a new village for the Gournis, using tranditional building techniques and local building materials. Though ultimately the project fails, largely because of an insensitive government bureaucracy, Fathy's book is significant because it illustrates in lucid but implicit fashion what dwelling is and how its understanding might lead to places harmonizing people, time and environment.

Fathy's picture of dwelling presents a particular people with a particular religious outlook living in a particular society and physical environment. According to Fathy, a building element -- be it house, courtyard, village street plan or whatever -- will be successful when it incorporates the various dimensions of dwelling and both sustains and manifests its function and remembrance in people's daily living. Generally, this function and remembrance does not consciously announce its presence through the building element, but is there without attention, maintaining a sense of dwelling by its simple being in the place and moment.

Fathy points to several dimensions of dwelling which must be incorporated into building if the building will sustain and reflect successful dwelling. First, he indicates that building must sustain and reflect a smooth continuity of time. In this sense, building must place people in relation to their local and regional history as well as their future possibilities. The key process here, says Fathy, is tradition, which he describes as "the social analogy of personal habit" (p. 24) and a body of taken-for-granted knowledge, practices and techniques, such as brick making or dome construction, which releases the builder from distracting and inessential details. A tradition in architecture, Fathy believes, safeguards a people's culture and therefore also safeguards the passage of time. "If they run off the rails of tradition," he says in relation to

the Egyptian peasants, "they will inevitably meet disaster" (p. 25). Presently, Fathy believes, people throughout the Third World have frequently been tempted by the architectural styles and techniques of the West. The result is the loss of traditional building methods, for example the skill of dome making, which the Gournis no longer knew and which Fathy had to rediscover before he could begin to construct mud structures on a wide scale.

If building arising out of dwelling expresses human life in time, it also, in Fathy's account, is faithful to the physical environment of the locality and region. For New Gourna, the key building element is the mud brick, which leads to buildings that are experientially, ecologically, and aesthetically in tune with the physical environment. Physical comfort, for example, depends largely on the thermal qualities of the building's walls and roofs. The mud brick, a poor conductor of heat, is a perfect construction material, since it remains cool during the day and radiates heat at night. In the hot arid climate of Upper Egypt, with its widely fluctuating day and nighttime temperatures, people can live downstairs by day and move up to the roof in the evening to sleep in the cool nighttime air. At the same time, mud bricks are inexpensive and lead to buildings of human scale that have an unselfconsciously pleasurable aesthetic impact:

> Besides being cheap, [mud brick housing] is also beautiful. It cannot help being beautiful, for the structure dictates the shapes and the material imposes the scale, every line respects the distribution of stresses, and the building takes on a satisfying and natural shape (p. 11).

Besides encompassing time and environment, building as it arises from dwelling reflects and sustains a people's society and the socioeconomic order that maintains their sense of group purpose and coherence. In his plan of New Gourna, Fathy puts attention on family, extended family, and village structures and how they can be expressed through building design. In relation to family, houses are not free-standing but fused together in neighborhood blocks to support and reflect the badana, a tightly related group of ten to twenty families with a recognized patriarch. Old Gourna had been divided into four quarters, each housing one of the four main village tribes, and Fathy follows a similar pattern for organizing the badana neighborhoods in New Gourna. Each tribe is associated with different activities and Fathy uses these activities to organize the quarters. The quarter for the Hassassna, for example, always respected as learned and pious people, is grouped around the buildings representing religion and learning, like the mosque and village's two primary schools.

In addition, Fathy's account suggests that a building sustained by dwelling supports a satisfactory economic existence in relation to society: "How the villagers earn their living," he says, "must affect the design of their houses and the provision of public buildings" (p. 89). Fathy seeks to establish for the new village a viable economic context that will be founded on the past. He encourages farming and rural crafts, particularly those common to life in the old village, such as weaving, dying, and potting. Also, Fathy insists that the Gourni build the new village themselves, since this experience may lead them to feel care and concern for the village (in Heidegger's terms, sparing and preserving) and will teach them building crafts, especially dome and vault construction, which might provide a trade for life.

Beyond time, environment, and society, a building in tune with dwelling, Fathy's account suggests, arises from and sustains a sense of religious outlook and purpose. The key here, says Fathy, is building arising from traditional religious architecture of the region: "I believe," he writes, "that wherever a tradition of building exists, there the religious architecture of the locality will have grown to represent its people's idea of the holy, and I think it right to respect and keep the local form and character" (p. 74). Thus, in building the village mosque, Fathy keeps the Upper Egyptian tradition of a bold, straight outside staircase to the minaret, which, he says, stands up "like a high pulpit above the mosque" (p. 75).

Fathy indicates how a building arising from dwelling must also account for other dimensions of living -- for example, accommodating people's biological and sanitary needs or linking one particular place of dwelling with the larger regional and ecological whole of which it is a part. The main point to realize, particularly in using Fathy's discussion as one implicit concretization of Heidegger's dwelling, is that an element of building is successful when in accurate, practical fashion it cuts across the many single dimensions of dwelling to create a physical form through which each of the dimensions are manifested and sustained. Perhaps the best example of this harmony of dimensions is the courtyard which works as a building element experientially, behaviorally, environmentally, socially, and religiously. Environmentally and spiritually, the courtyard keeps out the hostile desert and brings man in touch with the sky, through which, says Fathy, the Arab discovers God. Because of the courtyard, he writes, "the sky is, as it were, pulled into intimate contact with the house, so that the spirituality of the home is constantly replenished from heaven" (p. 56). In Hiedegger's terms here, the courtyard is a building element linking earth, sky and gods. At the same time, the courtyard of each individual house generates a sense of privacy and serenity, while the larger courtyard for the neighborhood as a whole provides a space for storage, interpersonal contact and social celebrations such as weddings. All in all, the courtyard joins people in sympathetic linkage to the world in which they were born and live. It integrates the Fourfold in terms of space and place and works in an under-the-surface fashion to help people understand in unselfconscious fashion the nature of humanhood.

What is the practical value of phenomenologically interpreting empirical contexts which implicitly describe particular situations of dwelling? At one level, the Gourni's situation is far removed from ours, yet in another important sense it is exactly the same in that we all strive to dwell in as complete and authentic fashion as we can, however that mode of dwelling is manifested concretely. A phenomenological consideration of Fathy's work sensitizes the student to the practical expression of dwelling and provokes such questions as how successful dwelling is in today's Western world and how it might be improved, especially in terms of lifestyle and design.

Ultimately, the crux of dwelling is its indication and recognition that people are immersed in their particular world and that this immersion, this being-in-the-world, houses a wish and need to be and live in that world in an involved, caring way. This involvement and care is multidimensional, projecting simultaneously to and from all aspects of the situation that we call humanhood. The requisite of dwelling, in other words, is the soil and nurturement from

which all human activity, including building, grows. To dwell is the essence and grounding of all human being-in-the-world. The more complete the dwelling can be, the better we will be and become.

The insight that Fathy's account provides is a better understanding of dwelling and its relation to a particular place and people. In discussing an architecture for the Gourni, Fathy unintentionally portrays dwelling as it must be concretely. He writes:

> You must start right from the beginning, letting your new buildings grow from the daily lives of the people who will live in them, shaping the houses to the measure of the people's songs, weaving the pattern of a village as if on the village looms, mindful of the trees and the crops that will grow there, respectful to the skyline and humble before the seasons. There must be neither faked tradition or faked modernity, but an architecture that will be the visible and permanent expression of the character of the community (p. 45).

In one sense, this depiction seems far from our own worlds, yet we too strive to dwell and must ask how our world can be better made to foster dwelling and our need to dwell. This task is not easy, and awareness ultimately is not enough. Yet to improve who we are and what our world is, we first must become aware, and a phenomenological exploration of work like Fathy's as it reflects and indicates dwelling can help such awareness to grow. Eventually, we must not only see but do, but how that doing is to happen, especially in the Western World, is an open question which in time we may all have to confront in our own way to the best of abilities that we can muster.

It is precisely because our Western World has reached such a tremendous level of technology and sophistication that the notion of dwelling becomes crucial to the major task at hand - i.e., becoming responsible for our world by responding to it and caring for it. The point is not to return to naiveté or to a more simple past, but to better dwell in what we are given. The situation is difficult because technology makes what is given unappealing. Who, for example, wishes to go to the park each summer evening and converse with neighbors when he can sit in the air-conditioned comfort of his home and watch television? A phenomenological consideration of empirical accounts like Fathy's brings the notion of dwelling into a context which is less complex existentially and closer to essential needs of environment and individual human being. From this vantage point, we may return to our own modern worlds with a refreshed, expanded outlook. This outlook may help us to better see who we are and to better understand what degree of dwelling is present in our world and how its presence might be expanded and deepened.

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Dwelling, according to Heidegger, is the process through which people make their place of existence a home. To dwell is "to be on the earth as a mortal," which in turn means "to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for" the place and community where one chooses to live (Heidegger 1971, p. 147). The key to dwelling, Heidegger argues, is sparing and preserving -- the kindly concern for land, things, creatures and people as they are and as they can become. As human beings, we cannot fail to dwell, for dwelling, ultimately, is the essential existential core of human being-in-the-world from which there is no escape. The key question is how do we dwell in our own particular situations and how can we affect the quality of our dwelling for better or worse?

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